

SRL and EFL homework: gender and grade effects.

Abstract

This study investigates the associations between gender and school grade level and some process variables such as: students' English as Foreign Language (EFL) - English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Defined as "... tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are intended to be carried out during nonschool hours" (Cooper, 2001, p. 3), homework is also said to be the instructional strategy influenced by more factors than any other one. In spite of all this, homework is still one of the most extensively used teaching strategies all over the academic world. Behind a simple definition, one can say, hides one of the most complex educational tools, in the sense that homework goes beyond the school walls and invades the physical and familiar environment of each learner. Teachers, parents and particularly students, are the trilogy in the homework issue, its main vectors and actors (Cooper, 2001; Walberg & Paik, 2000).

Being a good way of extending the school day, homework gives students the opportunity to practice and learn the material studied at school with no time constraints and at their own pace. According to literature, time spent on homework is a good predictor and promoter of school achievement (Cooper, 1989; Keith, Keith, & Page., 1985). However, besides the time spent on the assigned tasks, some researchers stress their quality and adequacy as key factors on the impact homework has on achievement (Trautwein & Koller, 2003). Many of our students, especially those at risk, fail to do homework because they lack either the appropriate resources or the necessary selfdiscipline to complete homework. Unable to set daily goals and to manage time properly, our students' homework lacks quantity and quality (Mourao, 2004). Besides, as later grades require students to be personally responsible not only for completing assigned academic tasks but also for self-directed studying, it would seem that sooner or later our present students will be at risk.

This paper presents some of the findings of a research study conducted in Portugal with a large sample of fifth to ninth graders, from compulsory education. It intended to measure the associations between gender and school grade level and the following process variables: students' English as Foreign Language (EFL) homework attitudes and time on homework, but also students' self regulated learning processes and study time. Students' EFL self-efficacy beliefs were also considered in the present study.

Self-regulated learning cyclical nature

Becoming self-regulated implies students' metacognitive, motivational and behavioral active participation in their own learning process (Zimmerman, 2000). Students' degree of self-regulation may vary in terms of being more or less capable of generating thoughts, feelings and actions to reach their goals. Students may be more or less self-regulated in the extent to which they are able to properly manage specific processes, use effective learning strategies and find the right responses to improve their academic achievement. Researchers on SRL share the belief that students' own perceptions as learners and the way they make use of different processes to regulate their learning are the key factors in better analyzing and understanding their academic achievement (Zimmerman, 2002).

In order to achieve, students apply their available cognitive strategies to the assigned tasks and this occurs within a certain context. This is a continuous and constant process that demands training and experience. Attaining mastery implies the perfect coordination of the three components, namely personal, behavioral and environmental (Zimmerman, 2000). Cognitive strategies can't be universally used; that is, they don't apply to all tasks and to all students in the same and successful way. Proficient self-regulated students constantly reassess the effectiveness of the strategies they use: seeking, changing and trying on different and more successful strategies in order to attain mastery. According to Zimmerman (2000), self-regulation is a dynamic and open-ended process that being a cyclical activity occurs in three different phases known as: forethought, volitional control and self reflection.

The forethought phase refers to the processes and beliefs that influence beforehand students' efforts to initiate learning, and determine their learning rhythm and performance. The volitional control phase,

essential to the starting and maintaining of action, includes, for instance, the efforts to control attention and to focus on the task, thus allowing in this way performance optimization. Corno (2001) emphasizes the determining role of this phase. In her opinion it is essential that students protect themselves from eventual distracters and competitors to the task performance in order to keep focused. Finally, the self-reflection phase takes place immediately after learning efforts have been made and relates to the way students react and respond to the efforts involved. By completing this open-ended self-regulatory cycle the self-reflection phase leads to and at the same time influences the next starting forethought phase as well as the subsequent efforts involved in the oncoming new learning experiences.

Homework and self-regulation

No one is born self-regulated. One can say that students become self-regulated over time and through enriching experiences such as homework may turn out to be. Self-regulatory competencies are extremely necessary when students complete homework assignments (Corno, 2000). Different authors have discussed the daily challenge of completing homework assignments. Corno invites us to look at homework in a different way and her wise words show that, in fact, homework is a complicated endeavor (Corno, 1996, 2000). Attending to the volitional costs of doing homework and understanding it as a complex process and not just as a product in itself, may help teachers and educators to rethink and redirect their teaching actions and attitudes and contribute to a better understanding of students' often neglected perspective on homework. Besides the intellectual demands of homework, children have to cope with distractions and to manage their emotions while doing homework, as assigned homework tasks are surely less motivating than watching a favorite TV show or surfing the Net (Bembenutty, 2005). Adequate modeling and monitoring by parents may be of great help in developing children's efficient self-regulatory competencies and routines even during adolescence (Rosario, Mourao, Soares, Chaleta, Gracio, Nunez, & Gonzalez-Pianda, 2005).

As in other academic tasks homework completion and the level of performance in homework assignments is strongly influenced by students' motivational beliefs. Students' perceived value of the tasks on hand might have either a positive or a negative load. Perceived utility and importance, that is the intrinsic value given to those same tasks by students, as well as perceived implicit costs, that is, the necessary efforts to complete the assignments are some relevant factors when looking at homework through a motivational lens (Warton, 2001). If adults see homework as an achievement-related activity, with immediate or at least inevitable long-term benefits, for children homework may be an activity of great costs with no foreseen immediate or long-term benefits.

Leading students to a better understanding of the importance of homework assignments completion, letting them know that homework is their job, assigning them well designed, useful and meaningful tasks are some of the ways to improve the important role of homework in students' learning and achievement. Homework should be neither a series of boring activities nor an endless game. Demanding but attainable tasks balanced with creative and appealing ones could be the magic key to open the way to the indispensable self-directed studying required in order to attain higher academic grades in the future.

Method

Participants A sample of 3929 students (49.9 per cent male and 50.1 per cent female) from fifth to ninth grades, average age 13 (SD = 3.1) from 14 Portuguese state schools (compulsory education) participated in this study.

Measures Attitudes towards EFL homework were measured by a short version of EFL homework questionnaire (Qtpcl, Questionario de TPC de Ingles--Rosario, et al., 2005), consisting of a 7-item scale assessing students' attitudes and behaviors towards EFL homework (e.g., I study EFL even when I don't have any assigned homework; alpha de Cronbach was equal to .84). In order to assess students' perceived self-efficacy in EFL the question: "How well can you learn EFL?" was asked (Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992). In this item students rated their perceived self-efficacy in EFL according to a 7-point scale. The responses ranged from 1 (not well at all) to 7 (very well). Self-regulated learning processes were measured by the Self-regulation processes inventory IPPA - Iberia Parish Port Authority IPPA - Idaho Pork Producers Association

Procedure All the participants and their parents signed an informed consent form. Students' participation was voluntary. The scales were administered during class time in the middle of the second term of the

school year in 14 Portuguese public schools from the north of the country. In each school students were randomly selected. Students were instructed to take their time on completing the surveys and to ask for help if they had any questions.

Results

The main goal of this study concerns the investigation of gender and school year association to perceived EFL self-efficacy, time on doing homework, attitudes towards homework, and self-regulation, taken as dependent variables. To this end MANOVA analyses were conducted. A significant multivariate effect of gender and school grade on perceived EFL self-efficacy, time on doing homework, attitudes towards homework, and self-regulation was found: Lambda Wilks was equal to .946; the F value (6,3501) equaled 32.995, there for the p value was .000, and Lambda Wilks was equal to .848; F value (24,1221) equaled 24.618 there for the p value was .000, meaning that taken together, both gender and school grade explain significantly the variance of these dependent variables.

Analyzing data for each of the independent variables, we observed significant differences between boys and girls in three of the four dependent variables: time on homework the F value (1,3506) equaled 14.178 there for the p value was .000; and eta was .004]; attitudes towards homework, the F value (1,3506) equaled 41.831, there for the p value was .000 and eta was equal to .012 and self-regulation the F value (1,3506) equaled 98.260, there for the p value was .000 and eta was equal to .027. Mean scores suggest that girls spend more time doing homework. They also present more positive attitudes towards homework, showing, not surprisingly according to literature, to be more self-regulated than boys.

Regarding school grade, positive and significant associations were found in all four dependent variables: time on doing homework the F value (4,3508) equaled 25.249 and there for the p value was .000 and eta equaled .028]; EFL self-efficacy the F value (4,3508) equaled 31.380, there for the p value was .000 and eta equaled .035]; attitudes towards homework the F value (4,3508) equaled 111.854, there for the p value was .000 and eta equaled .113] and self-regulation the F value (4,3508) equaled 31.506, there for the p value was .000 and eta equaled .035].

These findings show that all the considered dependent variables are significantly associated with the school grades of the Portuguese compulsory educational system. The mean scores presented suggest an inverse association of these variables, meaning that as students ascend in school grade, their involvement in learning and studying decreases and their attitudes towards homework become less positive.

Discussion

This study focused on the effects of gender and school grade on some variables that can help to explain academic achievement. Data suggest that both gender and school grade explain the variance of the variables taken into account. Findings confirm prior researches indicating that students' self-regulation decreases as they progress through school grades (Mourao, 2004; Rosario, et al., 2005) and stress the lower involvement of boys on learning and studying. Data also highlight some concerns relating to homework and self-regulation, since it is known that students who engage in high quality learning processes are more likely to increase their self-efficacy as learners and to achieve better academic results (Plant, Ericsson, Hill & Asberg, 2005; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005).

These findings help to explain the poor outcomes of Portuguese students in Pisa International Study (2000) and should be taken into account by teachers, parents and policy makers in order to introduce some educational changes that may lead to improve on this low performance status. For instance, schools could organize debates, panels and workshops for teachers and parents to become aware of these gender effects and their consequences, but they could also promote explicit remedial activities in order to reduce boys' failure and dropout rates. Time on task, SRL strategies and high quality learning processes should be directly addressed and intentionally trained in class so that students can improve the quality of their work and attain a higher academic performance. Homework practices should be generalized as promoting tools of students' autonomy and responsibility, as there is evidence of the positive influences of homework on students' academic achievement (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). These data are a first attempt to understand students' attitudes towards homework and the underlying SRL processes involved in homework in Portuguese compulsory education (Rosario, Mourao, Trigo, Nunez, & Gonzalez-Pienda, 2005). Future research is required not only to deepen understanding of the causal relations of these

variables, but also to examine other factors influencing the effectiveness of homework, namely the mediating role of EFL self-efficacy in homework completion, the type and nature of daily tasks assigned, their amount, the quality of the feedback provided by teachers and parental involvement in homework.

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